

MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

What are Anxiety Disorders in Adults?¹

What is Anxiety?

Most people feel nervous or uneasy when they start a new job, go to the dentist, or leave on a trip to a place they have never been. Some of us worry about what might happen “if” then our hands may sweat, our heart may beat faster, or we get breathless for a moment. **These are common anxious feelings. Our anxiety comes and goes, normally. It lessens as we become familiar with a situation or we resolve a worry over something.**

What are Anxiety Disorders?

Anxiety Disorders are much, much stronger versions of common anxious feelings. **Reason and will power cannot make the over-anxious feelings go away.** They are frequently unpredictable, and interfere with our everyday life. Sometimes the over-anxious feelings keep us from engaging in normal activities, even when we want to take part in the activity.

Anxiety Disorders are the most common mental illnesses in the United States

About 16 percent of American adults are affected by them every year.

This year, our legislators passed a “parity” law. For the first time ever, some of our medical insurance coverage must include mental health treatment as it does any other treatment. It’s called “parity.” It means if we have the flu, a broken leg, an anxiety disorder or diabetes, our public health providers are expected to care for all treatment on par, or equally, with each other.

A few of the different kinds of Anxiety Disorders, are:

Panic Disorder causes repeated and often unexpected attacks of *intense fear*. The attacks come suddenly and are usually full blown in 10 to 15 minutes. The panic attacks can include physical feelings such as: chest pain, dizziness, fast heartbeat, sweating, breathlessness, nausea. We may feel scared, confused and for a time believe we are dying or worse. Between panic attacks we worry about then the next attack will happen. Women are at higher the risk for panic disorders. Both our heredity and our life experiences contribute to anxiety disorders.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (also called OCD) results in:

- repeated upsetting thoughts (called obsessions), or
- ritual behaviors (called compulsions)

The thoughts or behaviors cannot be easily controlled or even stopped. Some obsessive thoughts may be worry that someone will be hurt; or germs will contaminate the house, or our bodies. We use compulsive behaviors to try to control the obsessive thoughts. These behaviors might include repeating ordinary things like locking a door or washing our hands. It is equally common among men and women.

Phobias are very overwhelming fears tied to a very specific situation or thing. When we have a Phobia we limit our activities frequently missing really important life experiences.

There are three main kinds of Phobias:

1. **Agoraphobia** - an intense fear of being in a situation that is hard to get out of like crowded or enclosed places. This phobia may keep us from leaving our house. Women's risk is twice as high as men's to develop Agoraphobia. We might also experience panic attacks.
2. **Simple Phobias** - fear of a particular thing, like an animal, heights or injections. Again, we may have panic attacks.
3. **Social Phobia** - fear of receiving criticism or being embarrassed in front of others. We avoid social events. Oh, yes, there can be those Panic Attacks.

What kind of doctor can help diagnose Anxiety Disorders?

Either refer yourself, or have your primary care physician refer you to a **psychiatrist or psychologist**. They **may be** in private practice, or part of a medical group.

Many people receive care thru licensed mental health centers.

Other physical and psychological conditions can have the same symptoms as Anxiety Disorders.

That’s why it’s so very important to have a medical examination to rule out other possible causes of anxiety symptoms.

How can Anxiety Disorders be treated?

Treatment for Anxiety Disorders often combines medications and specific types of talking therapies.

Behavioral Therapy focuses on changing specific actions and uses techniques to stop unwanted behaviors.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy teaches people to identify, understand and change the ways they think.

¹ Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery (DBHR) with Aging and Disabilities Services Administration in the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. We are both the Washington State Mental Health Authority and the Substance Abuse Authority (SSA) and we are located in Cherry Street Plaza, Olympia.